

Questions and Answers arising from the Consultation Process

This document has been created from questions raised at the parents' meeting, e-mail responses, student council, and staff meetings.

A. Benefits/Risks

What are the benefits for the students should it be decided to adopt Academy status?

Academies are free to spend their total budget as they see fit. We would benefit in two ways. Firstly we would regain funds routinely top sliced and retained by the local authority from the government's annual allocation. Secondly, we would have even greater discretion to direct resources including the whole of our government funding to meet our own school aims. In a stressed financial world we would like to make our own choices with our own students in the forefront of our minds.

We also have to recognise that Academies are a main plank of Government policy. The government is focused on raising standards of education which they believe will be best achieved by promoting the new Academy ethos. Consequently, to remain an outstanding school as the educational landscape evolves we may well need to be an Academy. In short, the benefits include:

- Gordon's has enjoyed autonomy for many years and operating a unique school model greater independence is in keeping with our history and ethos
- Having more autonomy to best use the school's total budget share to meet the needs of our students, particularly in an austere financial climate.
- Continuing to attract and retain the very highest quality staff.
- Using the opportunities and freedom given to new-style Academies to shape and secure the school's future direction.

Some stakeholders have highlighted various risks and issues associated with potential conversion.

These include:

- The uncertainty of future funding models for all schools.
- The costs of services Academies have to provide could be in excess of income.
- A change of education policy with any future change of Government to the detriment of Academies.
- Increasing numbers of Academies could be detrimental to a Local Authority's ability to provide for its maintained schools.

The joint Governors & Gordon Foundation Working Group will examine the potential liabilities and risks involved with Academy conversion. The Working Group's findings will be made available to both the Governing Body and Foundation Committee in good time for robust scrutiny before any decision to convert is taken.

Why make any changes to such a successful school?

Academies are the Coalition Government's preferred vehicle for school improvement. There are risks in remaining with a status quo which may well quickly deteriorate and become unrecognisable in what is likely to be a period of reduced budgets for all maintained schools, rationalisation within Local Authorities and an inability of Local Authorities to sustain quality staff in their dwindling stock of remaining maintained schools. Part of Gordon's School success has been based on the autonomy it has always enjoyed arising from its boarding school status and support from the Gordon Foundation. Academy status would simply enhance our already existing model.

B. Funding

Is a private sponsor required?

No outside sponsors are required for an 'outstanding' school to convert to an Academy.

Will Gordon's be better funded as an Academy?

The likely net increase, after considering buy-back of existing LA service agreements is approximately £145,000 per annum.

Could there be cuts to Academy funding in the future?

There could be, but there could also be reduced funding from the L.A. Governors & the Gordon Foundation will seek to weigh up the relative advantages/disadvantages and to make decision in the light of the best possible information available.

What would happen if there were insurance claims made due to an injury to a student or staff member?

The school has insurance to cover any claims already; this would continue.

Where will the school's funding come from, if not the Local Authority?

Central Government via an organisation called the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA).

How would major projects be funded?

We would have to apply to central government, rather than the LA for capital funds. Although finance from both sources is currently very scarce, it is difficult to envisage a situation in which Gordon's would be more likely to gain a capital grant from Surrey LA than central government, when central government is keen to 'make good schools centres of excellence' and no significant capital grants have been provided by Surrey in recent years.

C. Staffing

What would happen to teachers' current pay and conditions if the school became an Academy? How would the pay and conditions be altered?

There would no change to staff terms and conditions as a result of Academy conversion.

Would current staff be issued with new contracts?

No. A letter of variation will be issued indicating that all their conditions of service will remain unchanged.

Do continuous service and pension rights apply to these 'new' contracts?

Yes.

It appears that every teaching union are vehemently against schools becoming Academies. If this is indeed the case, the school runs the risk of alienating the very teachers who have made the school so successful.

Union opposition is principle-led and not driven by what is best for Gordon's pupils and staff. Staff responses (anonymous or via the unions) have been requested but none have been submitted. The staff are talented and committed and every effort will always be made to ensure that Gordon's continues to attract and retain the best staff team.

D. Admissions

Would Academy status mean Gordon's was no longer required to follow the national and local admissions code?

No, as an Academy Gordon's would continue to adhere to the national Admissions Code and the priority order published by Surrey County Council.

Will Gordon's School remain non-selective?

Yes, being inclusive is part of our ethos.

E. Partnerships/Stakeholders

What power does the parent body have as part of the consultation / decision making process?

The parent body forms part of the consultation process. Their views, alongside other stakeholders will be considered by Governors & the Gordon Foundation as part of the decision making process.

A parents' focus group, including parent governors has also been convened to discuss the responses to the consultation.

How would Academy conversion affect local primary / 'feeder' schools?

We remain committed to help our 'feeder' primary schools. Conversion would improve our community relationship as we would be expected to work closely with those nearest to us.

What about links with the Local Authority?

The change of status brings greater independence from the Local Authority but there will be the opportunity to continue to purchase services. Surrey County Council and Babcock 4S are developing service level agreements for all of their traded services.

It could be argued that a freer market for SCC traded services will improve quality and value for money for schools.

Why sever links with the Local Authority when Gordon's has prospered as a Voluntary Aided 'maintained' school? Also, why move now when freedoms from SCC are only going to become greater?

It is true that in recent years Gordon's has succeeded within the LA fold; however Gordon's has done so with little assistance from SCC. If it was not for the Gordon Foundation's financial support, Gordon's would almost certainly have been closed down by Surrey 15 years ago.

Gordon's has enjoyed a very 'light touch' from the Local Authority and might well enjoy more in the future. As it is these very freedoms that helped the school prosper it is difficult to see how maximising freedom as an Academy can be judged to be detrimental.

F. Academy Status and the Process

Only 'failing schools' are Academies?

No. Coalition 'converter Academies' are successful schools which the government seeks to allow greater independence; these 'new' Academies are very different from Labour's 'transformational Academies', which did tend to be 'failing schools'.

Will Gordon's School name need to change?

No

Will the strengths and ethos of the school be eroded?

No, and at the suggestion of other stakeholders we are considering a Gordon's Charter to embody the ethos and values we hold dear.

Is an Academy still inspected by Ofsted?

Yes. However, as Gordon's School is an 'outstanding' school, under the current arrangements we are unlikely to be inspected unless there is a significant drop in standards. Schools that are judged 'satisfactory' or 'good' will be subject to the existing 3 yearly inspection schedule.

What is the time scale for conversion?

Currently, the first possible conversion date will be 1 September 2011, however due to the number of applications being processed by the DfE the date is likely to be later. The DfE have recently announced that there will be monthly conversion opportunities on the first day of each subsequent month.

If schools become Academies what would happen to the remainder of Surrey schools?

Our understanding is their position with Surrey will not change.

As an Academy the School would technically become a Trust and the Foundation would remain unchanged. How many trustees form the Academy Trust?

Each Academy Trust needs at least 3 Members and the Chair of Governors is always one. At Gordon's it is likely to be the Chair of Governors, the Treasurer of the Foundation, and a second representative from the Foundation.

What is the proposed governor structure?

This is a decision for the Governing Body, but no substantial change to the Governing Body of the school is expected. Contrary to some comments, both Parent and Staff Governors would continue to be elected.

What happens to the land and buildings?

No change. They will continue to be owned and maintained by the Gordon Foundation.

What happens to the boarding fees?

No change. They will continue to be administered by the Gordon Foundation and will be subject to normal inflationary and operational increases.

Would there be any narrowing of the curriculum offer if Academy status was adopted?

Academy status does allow the opportunity to be more selective about the curriculum. We do not anticipate any narrowing of our current range because we believe that we currently provide an outstanding curriculum for our students. We will always offer those qualifications that give students the widest opportunities for their future.

Will conversion lead to an expansion of school numbers?

The Governors and Foundation recognise that one of the strengths of the school is its size and the relatively modest intake of pupils each year. Academy conversion is not connected to any expansion of school numbers.

Why is the conversion being considered now?

Nearly half the secondary schools in the country are considering conversion. It would be remiss of Gordon's not to consider the opportunity.

Several successful state boarding schools and Surrey secondary schools have already converted, Gordon's will not be the vanguard of change but to delay consideration further would risk the opportunity to negotiate a 'contract' with the DfE that preserves what makes Gordon's successful and unique.

Is there any need to hurry things through before the start of the next academic year?

Should the decision be taken to convert, the intention of the school leadership is to make a smooth transition in which students, staff and parents are unlikely to perceive any change – there certainly should be no disruption to the normal running of the school.

When considering the timetable for conversion, Governors & the Gordon Foundation are anxious to gain maximum benefits which are likely to be achieved by going sooner rather than later, if they decide to convert. Governors & the Gordon Foundation believe they are not acting with any undue haste when considering Academy conversion, especially given the matter was first mooted late summer term 2010.

What assurances do we have that someone impartial and with the power to influence matters will be available to hear our concerns and complaints when necessary?

The Governing Body take their monitoring role very seriously and would continue to do so if we became an Academy.

Will the school just be answerable to the Secretary of State for Education/DfE and will this be the only effective body to which the school is answerable?

In theory, we are answerable to the Secretary of State rather than the Local Authority, but we would be subject to many of the same checks on school performance and standards as currently.

Will support services such as outreach services and professional assistance be reduced because the school has to 'buy' them in?

No

Who makes the decision?

The Governing Body of Gordon's School and The Gordon Foundation.

Why do the Governors & the Gordon Foundation have the final decision?

The Governing Body are elected to ensure the highest educational, legal and moral standards. As owners of the school premises and the legacy of General Gordon, the Foundation has a vested interest in the long-term future of the school.

The decision whether or not to convert to Academy status is one that resides quite properly and solely with these two bodies The Governing Body of Gordon's School and The Gordon Foundation. Stakeholders can be confident that Governors & the Gordon Foundation have the best interest of the school at heart and will make the most appropriate decision for the future of the school.